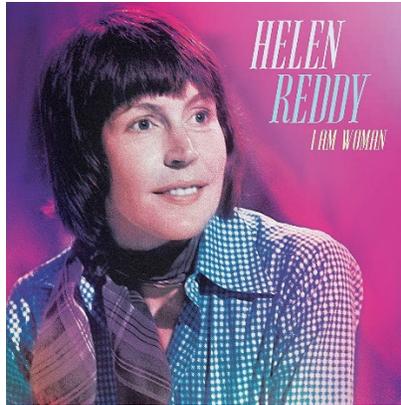


“I Am Woman”—Helen Reddy (1971)

Added to the National Registry: 2025

Essay by Ellen Koskoff (guest post)*



“I Am Woman,” Australian-American singer Helen Reddy's signature song of female empowerment, did not begin life as a hit. But, as it grew to become the musical icon of second-wave feminism, it took on a life of its own that still inspires. Initially released on Reddy's debut album, “I Don't Know How to Love Him” (Capitol Records), in May 1971, it languished for months in the hands of reluctant radio DJs, who generally dismissed it as “women's lib crap” (Brodsky 2025). However, when Ray Wald, Reddy's manager and husband, began pushing the song, radio stations were suddenly besieged by phone calls from female fans demanding to hear it.

Reddy wrote in her 2006 memoir, “The Woman I Am,” that she conceived the lyrics of the song as a tribute to the strong women in her life and in celebration of her involvement in the burgeoning Women's Movement. She was also motivated by the anger she felt at the dismissive way both she and the song were initially treated. As she stated in a 2003 Australian publication, “Sunday Magazine”:

I thought about all these strong women in my family who had gotten through the Depression and world wars and drunken, abusive husbands. But there was nothing in music that reflected that. The only songs [around] were “I Feel Pretty” or that dreadful song “Born A Woman.” These are not exactly empowering lyrics. I certainly never thought of myself as a songwriter, but it came down to having to do it (“Sunday Magazine” 2003, in Brodsky 2025).

After completing the first two verses of the lyrics, Reddy began setting them to music, but had trouble capturing the complex feelings of the lyrics musically, and enlisted the help of fellow Australian musician, Ray Burton, who co-wrote the stirring tune we know today.

Gaining some notoriety, the song was chosen in 1972 to accompany the opening and closing credits of the film, “Stand Up and Be Counted,” starring Jacqueline Bisset that chronicled the early Women's Movement in a small American town with some comedic elements intentionally added to show that feminists did indeed have a sense of humor. Its poster featured a cowgirl-

costumed Bisset and the slogan, “From Adam's rib to women's lib, baby, we've come a long, long way!” The song was then released as a single in May 1972, with an added third verse, and became a number one hit later that year, selling over a million copies.

To understand the enduring popularity and power of “I Am Woman,” it is important to place it in the dual contexts of radio broadcasting in the 1970s and second-wave feminism as it developed in the United States during the 1960s and ‘70s. Long before MTV, the internet, YouTube, and streaming services, radio was the primary medium of music consumption. Recording companies, such as Capitol, released recorded music on 45 rpm vinyl discs, and radio stations devoted to the Top 40--the current most popular songs--would play them to boost sales.

The original Top 40 lists, constructed in the early 1950s, were based on the number of times a song would be played on a jukebox--that wonderful, coin-operated, drop-a-disc contraption often found in restaurants of the day--and by the 1970s, Top 40 programs were a staple of radio broadcast formats. Devoted solely to audio, these broadcasts rivaled the popularity of the newly-invented television variety shows, becoming more important to record sales than any other medium.

But it was second-wave feminism that enabled “I Am Woman” to rise to iconic status and to keep it there as a symbol of radical social change. Reddy writes in her memoir:

With “I Am Woman,” I had touched a nerve, and women were responding. Through the medium of popular music, I was able to connect with all kinds of women--women who had been initially turned off by some of the more strident feminist voices; or women who believed they were already liberated. (“My husband lets me do whatever I want. I only have to ask.”) They might be listening to the car radio driving to the supermarket or picking the kids up from school, and the positive message in “I Am Woman” would seep into their subconscious. The acceptance of female equality was reaching a critical mass (Reddy 2006:145).

Second-wave feminism, a social movement of the 1960s and ‘70s, sought to build on the social and political gains of feminism's first wave, a period in the late 19th and early 20th century during which (white) women achieved the right to vote, to inherit property, and to have shared control over their children, among other gains.¹ Second-wave activists, beginning in the late 1950s, concentrated on other issues, such as marital rape, sexual harassment, and discrimination in education. This period also saw the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's “*Le Deuxieme Sexe*” (“*The Second Sex*,” 1949) and Betty Freidan's “*The Feminine Mystique*” (1963), among other iconic texts, along with the formation of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966, and the passing of laws protecting the right to abortion, in 1973.

“I Am Woman” quickly became a second-wave anthem and was sung frequently at women's gatherings, from intimate “consciousness-raising” moments to large fundraisers. Its gleeful message and jaunty music deeply resonated with many women, infusing them with hope of

¹ It was not until 1965, with the passing of the Voting Rights Act (equal access to voting for all citizens, regardless of race or ethnicity), that women of color gained suffrage along with their male counterparts.

radical and permanent change. Rachel Brodsky writes about such a spontaneous performance in a recent article about the song:

[I]n 1973, National Organization for Women founder Betty Friedan wrote how a gala in Washington, DC closed with the playing of “I Am Woman.” Friedan recalled: “Suddenly, women got out of their seats and started dancing around the hotel ballroom and joining hands in a circle that got larger and larger until maybe a thousand of us were dancing and singing, “I am strong, I am invincible, I am woman.” It was a spontaneous, beautiful expression of the exhilaration we all felt in those years, women really moving as women.”

The song has continued to the present day to both inspire and honor women's social and political rights. In 1989, for example, at the Mobilize for Woman's Rights rally in Washington DC, which I attended along with my step-daughter, Reddy's performance energized the more than 500,000 women and men there to protest new states' drawbacks on abortions. (Check it out at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBZ4As2Si-0> and notice a comment posted a year ago from a viewer: “I was there on that day...I'll never forget the collective power we all felt as woman in that moment. Gathered again in 2017 at Women's March in DC, numbed by the direction our county was taking... We must keep moving forward. Do not look back.”) And, in 2020, at the Australian ARIA Music Awards, the song was honored by a group of young singers in a tribute to Reddy (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UXVC-w-e2c8>).

It is significant that “I Am Woman” has been inducted into the Library of Congress' National Recording Registry in 2025. Although the third and fourth waves of feminism have garnered further gains for women's equality under the law, honoring this song, now 54 years old, reminds us that there is still work to be done. We are entering a time where women's rights are stagnating or eroding: the constitutional right to abortion was overturned in 2022; the gender wage gap persists--women still earn roughly 80 cents for every dollar that men earn; women are still less likely to be hired or promoted in the workplace; and, rapes and other forms of sexual violence are rising.

But, what is most disheartening is that the Equal Rights Amendment to the US Constitution (ERA), whose first section reads, “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex,” has not yet passed into law. This simple statement, first proposed in 1923, although ratified by the 38 states it needs to pass, has not yet been officially recognized as the 28 amendment. Now is the perfect time to honor Helen Reddy's song and to recommit to its powerful message: “I am strong, I am invincible, I am woman.”

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.